
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

by Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem's
Consumer Protection and Antitrust Division

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VACATION OFFERS NOT ALL "SUN AND FUN"

They're coming! They arrive by mail, by phone, by fax, and over the Internet. They are also advertised at events that draw large crowds and entice the consumer to deposit their name and telephone number for the chance to receive a vacation package. Dream vacation trips are being offered as prizes or sold at unbelievable prices. Be careful -- your dream adventure may become a nightmare if you fall victim to a scam. While some travel opportunities are legitimate, many are scam operations that defraud consumers out of a lot of money.

Often the schemes involve vacation travel packages. You see an advertisement -- airline tickets for two are available to fly anywhere in the world for just \$300. Here's what happened when a consumer called to inquire about the tickets. The consumer was instructed to obtain a cashier's check in the amount of \$316 for vouchers that would be sent to the consumer by courier C.O.D. When the vouchers were received, the consumer was then told to send a \$100 deposit to register for motel accommodations, which would cost \$69 to \$99 per person per night. It was also stated that the consumer would be charged an additional \$250 for peak season fees. At this point, the consumer called the hotel directly and was told the travel company had booked the consumer in the most expensive room available, which was \$100 per night for double occupancy. However, the travel company charged the consumer \$170 per night. When the consumer contacted the travel company and requested a refund, the travel company refused.

Watch out for these vacation scams. You receive a postcard saying you have been selected to receive a free trip, or an envelope marked "high priority mail" arrives in the mail. Either way, you are asked to call a toll-free number to receive your vacation package. But when you call, you are told that, because of the valuable travel vouchers in the package, a fee of \$398 will be charged to your credit card. You are led to believe that you can preview the travel package and that a full refund will be credited to your credit card if the preview package is returned to the company within 30 days. When you try to return the preview package to the company, the company claims the package had to be returned within seven days, not 30 days as previously indicated. The company refuses to issue a refund.

Another twist to this scam would involve "extras" or "conditions" you must pay; consequently the trip would not be "free." In addition to paying inflated prices for accommodations or paying for undisclosed additional charges, you may also find that the business is "out of business."

Many vacation package offers involve a timeshare presentation that consumers must attend in order to receive the full discount vacation package they were promised. Most times, consumers are not informed of the mandatory high pressure timeshare presentations until they arrive at their vacation sites. If they are informed ahead of time, they are told the presentations is only 90 minutes; then they are free to continue their vacation plans with the free tickets to the various tourist spots. Little do they know the high-pressure sales with which they will be faced.

Public events often allow booths where various products are offered. Vacation companies offer their vacation packages by placing a box where consumers can deposit forms with their name, address and telephone number for an opportunity to “receive” a vacation package. You are giving the vacation company authorization to call you, even if you are registered on the “Do Not Call” list. Read the entry form completely; you may decide to not deposit your name in that box.

You can avoid unpleasant surprises on a vacation by thoroughly checking a travel package before you commit to buy it. Here are some tips:

- Be careful of “great deals” and very low prices.
- Don’t be pressured into buying NOW. A good offer will still be a good offer a week later.
- Ask plenty of questions about what the price covers -- and doesn’t cover. Get names of specific hotels, airlines, and restaurants that the package includes. Contact these places yourself to double-check arrangements.
- Ask about cancellation policies and refunds.
- Get all information in writing before you agree to buy.
- Never give your credit card number or bank account numbers to unsolicited telephone salespeople.
- Don’t send cash by messenger or overnight mail.
- Compare trip costs with those available from local travel agents. It’s always a good idea to do business with a local, reputable company with which you are familiar.

If you have any doubts, say “NO.”

The Attorney General’s Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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